



# VOLPURNO — OR THE STUDENT

BY

W. WILKIE COLLINS

## VOLPURNO—OR THE STUDENT.

BY W. WILKIE COLLINS.

“ —Memory, like a drop that, night and day,  
Falls cold and ceaseless, wore *her* heart away.”—Lalla Rookh.

Perfectly overcome by the heat of an Italian evening at Venice, I quitted the bustling gaiety of St. Mark's Place for the quiet of a gondola, and directing the man to shape his course for the island of Lido, (a narrow strip of land dividing the "lagunes," or shallows beyond the city, from the open sea,) I seated myself on the prow of the vessel, with a firm determination to make the most of the sunsey wafts of air that every now and then ruffled the surface of the still, dark waters.

*The Albion. A Journal of News, Politics and Literature*, 8 July 1843; 2, 27

**THIS EDITION OF  
VOLPURNO  
IS LIMITED TO 300 COPIES**

**©THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY  
MARCH 2009**

## INTRODUCTION

It is always thrilling to find a previously unknown story by any author. But the discovery of Wilkie Collins's previously unrecorded tale 'Volpurno' is particularly exciting as it is the earliest story written by him which has been identified. It predates by more than a month 'The Last Stage Coachman' published in *Illuminated Magazine* August 1843 which for more than sixty years has held that record.<sup>1</sup>

Several new Collins works have been identified in recent years. 'The New Dragon of Wantley' (1851) was identified as an early Collins work in 2007 and subsequently published by the Wilkie Collins Society. It also reprinted 'The Hidden Cash' (1887) after it was rediscovered in 2002. The manuscript of the long lost first novel *Iolani* was first published in 1999 and two much shorter manuscript sketches – 'The Little Fable' and 'The Widows' were published from the original manuscripts by the Society in 1996 and 2005.

'Volpurno' was published on 8 July 1843 in a New York weekly *The Albion, or British, Colonial, and Foreign Weekly*<sup>2</sup> and in the same month in two other broadsheets – in Philadelphia in the *Pennsylvania Inquirer and National Gazette* on 20 July<sup>3</sup> and again in New York in *The New Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction* on 29 July<sup>4</sup>. These three titles – and a fourth in which it appeared in December<sup>5</sup> – make clear that the story is taken from a publication in England. The original source has yet to be identified but is probably dated June or possibly May 1843.

After its appearance in these four US weeklies all traces of it disappear for 165 years until its rediscovery in the autumn of 2008 by Daniel Hack, Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Michigan. It was reprinted early in 2009 with his introduction in *Times Literary Supplement*.<sup>6</sup> The Wilkie Collins Society is grateful to Professor Hack for copies of the original texts and permission to quote from his *TLS* piece.

### Early work

There are several tantalising pieces of evidence that Collins had a considerable number of items published in the early 1840s.

On 16 April 1844, when Wilkie was 20 and known to his family as Willy, his father William Collins stayed with the newly appointed President of Corpus Christi College Oxford, Rev. James Norris.<sup>7</sup> He wrote from Oxford to his wife Harriet asking her to send their son's press cuttings to him.

Pray send to Dr Thorne for Willy's stories and cut them out of their publications and send them by Post directly as well as any other letters or information you may wish to communicate.<sup>8</sup>

She clearly did so and three days later he replied.

Your letter and its contents gave me great pleasure. I am delighted to find you are in such good spirits and that all goes on well. Willy's poetic offering is very droll. Dr. Norris has read the papers and thinks he ought to do great things, he wishes he had been sent to College, of course – it is now however too late, and after all I see of a College life I know not what I sh<sup>d</sup> do had he been young enough to become a student.<sup>9</sup>

These letters were written just four months after Wilkie's father was confident enough of his son's writing abilities to begin his journal for that year with these words

January 1st, 1844.— As I think it quite possible that my dear son, William Wilkie Collins, may be tempted, should it please God to spare his life beyond that of his father, to furnish the world with a memoir of my life, I purpose occasionally noting down some circumstances as leading points, which may be useful.<sup>10</sup>

No other sources help us at that time. Few letters from Collins have survived from the early 1840s. Almost all that have were to his mother and none refers in any way to his inchoate writing career.

The next mention of the early publications comes in 1857. The journalist Edmund Yates interviewed Wilkie for his series 'Men of Mark' which he published in *The Train*. The piece is based on a face to face interview and contains this passage about his time in the early 1840s at the office of the tea merchant Antrobus in the Strand, London (now opposite Charing Cross station).

While in this office, and frequently during the time when his mind should have been occupied with invoices, bills of lading, and the state of the Chinese markets, he wrote a great deal for periodical publications, having previously tried his hand on tragedies, comedies, epic poems, and the usual literary rubbish invariably accumulated about themselves by "young beginners." For three or four years he remained in the tea-merchant's office, and during the whole time he practised the art of writing incessantly, and doubtless gained some facility which proved useful to him in his future career.<sup>11</sup>

Five years later in March 1862 Wilkie mentions the early days himself. He wrote to the French writer Alfred-Auguste Ernouf enclosing a short biographical note because "The published biographical notices of me, in England, are all more or less incorrect." In that note he writes

After my return to England, my father proposed sending me to the University of Oxford, with a view to my entering the Church. But I had no vocation for that way of life, and I preferred trying mercantile pursuits. I had already begun to write in secret, and mercantile pursuits lost all attraction for me.<sup>12</sup>

The most comprehensive statement dates from September 1870 when an American journalist George Towle wrote a piece about Wilkie in *Appleton's Journal of Popular Literature, Science, and Art*. It is based mainly on a note prepared by Collins but Towle had also visited him in 1868.<sup>13</sup>

...at seventeen or eighteen he was placed in a merchant's office. In this pursuit he continued for four years; but, with his tastes, he would hardly have remained so long, had he not had a pursuit of his own to follow, which really engaged his interest. He was already an author in secret. Few are so disinclined that their children should pursue a literary or artistic career, as literary men and artists themselves; and William Collins had doubtless used his powers of persuasion to divert his son from the hazardous venture of letters. There was, however, hardly any form of audacious literary enterprise proper to his age which he did not surreptitiously venture, while he was supposed to be in a fair way of becoming one of the solid commercial props of the city of London. Toward the end of the four years he had grown wise enough 'to descend from epic poems and blank-verse tragedies' to unassuming little articles and stories, some of which found their way modestly into the small periodicals of the time.<sup>14</sup>

Towards the end of his life in a letter to George Bainton dated September 1887 Collins again mentions his early experiences of writing

After some slight preliminary attacks, the mania for writing laid its hold on me definitely when I left school. While I was in training for a commercial life—and afterwards when I was a student at Lincoln's Inn—I suffered under trade and suffered under law with a resignation inspired by my endless engagement in writing poems plays and stories—or to express myself more correctly, by the pleasure that I felt in following an undisciplined imagination wherever it might choose to lead me. I produced, it is needless to say, vast quantities of nonsense, with an occasional—a very occasional—infusion of some literary promise of merit. But I did not think my time was entirely wasted—for I believe I was insensibly preparing myself for the career which I have since followed.<sup>15</sup>

Despite these hints of prolific early authorship and, according to Yates, 'a great deal for periodical publications' there are still only two known examples. Wilkie Collins's next identified publication was the obituary of his father in *The Art-Union Journal* in 1847.<sup>16</sup>

### **Influences**

Collins went to Italy several times in his life but in 1843 his only experience of Venice had been as a 14 year old when he stayed there with his family. Leaving Florence on 14 May 1838 the party travelled via Bologna, Parma, Verona, and Padua arriving in Mestri towards the end of the month. From there they took a gondola to Venice where they spent about a month until 26 June when they left for Innsbruck.<sup>17</sup>

Collins's account of the time in Venice concentrates on his father's excursions both to see great works of art and to paint and gives little information about his own experiences or his reactions to the city. We know that the family stayed in a house opposite the studio where Titian painted and they met Byron's servant Beppo. Although no direct influence on this story can be discerned we do know it was a time Collins valued. In his 1862 letter to Ernouf he wrote

At the age of thirteen, I went with my father and mother to reside for two years in Italy - where I learnt more which has been of use to me, among the pictures, the scenery, and the people, than I ever learnt at school.<sup>18</sup>

Some years later he wrote to another correspondent

The only part of my “education” which has, as I believe, done me any good in later life was given to me by my father, who took me to Italy with him for two years when I was a boy of twelve years of age. Here I learned to observe for myself.<sup>19</sup>

If Wilkie’s Italian trip was influential, Daniel Hack sees in ‘Volpurno’ the influence of the Gothic literature which we know Wilkie read as a youth. He wrote to his father in 1842 when he was 18 years old.

I sat with my back to the window, and my hand in my pocket, freezing my horrified auditors by a varied recital of the most terrible portions of the Monk and Frankenstein. Every sentence that fell from my lips, was followed in rapid succession by - “Lor!” - “Oh!” “Ah!” “He! He!” “Good Gracious!” &c &c.

None of our country relations I am sure ever encountered in their whole lives before such a hash of diablerie, demonology, & massacre with their Souchong and bread and butter. I intend to give them another course, emphasizing, the Ancient Mariner, Jack the Giant Killer, The Mysteries of Udolpho and an enquiry into the life and actions (when they were little girls) of the witches in Macbeth.<sup>20</sup>

We can see in this letter the fun the young Wilkie gets from his storytelling powers as he mined at least the more respectable Gothic tales to startle his unsophisticated relatives. Described as a story of ‘monastic debauchery, black magic, and diabolism’ *The Monk* was the gothic novel published in 1796 by Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775-1818). *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, published in the year Lewis died, galvanised sewn together body parts into life.

Wilkie’s second course includes the quintessential gothic novel Anne Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) which described supernatural terrors in gloomy castles in 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy. ‘Jack The Giant Killer’ was a well known English fairy tale – the pre-cursor of *Jack and the Beanstalk* – which was more comic than gruesome but was certainly dramatic. And Coleridge’s poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), although not normally associated with the gothic tradition, certainly has powerful and supernatural moments.

Later in life, when he was using his abilities as a successful writer of original works, Wilkie continued to tell stories to enthral visitors. Nathaniel Beard, the son of Wilkie’s doctor, gives this account of how Wilkie amused them, probably in the 1860s.

Wilkie Collins could tell a story very incisively and dramatically in a few words. I have always to think twice before being sure that I have not read the one which made “Monk” Lewis’s reputation, simply from hearing it narrated by him, with all its force and supernatural terror condensed into about ten minutes of time.<sup>21</sup>

Hack finds a very specific set of parallels between ‘Volpurno’ and *Frankenstein*: “in both...the wedding ceremony of a scientific student is followed by a boat ride and a celebration which is disrupted by a monstrous apparition.”

In ‘Volpurno’ the student is “haunted by a vision of a woman of disgusting ugliness who seemed to pursue and torment him wherever he went”. Twelve years later Collins **wrote in the story which came to be known as ‘The Dream Woman’ about** Isaac Scatchard who was pursued by a woman whom he had seen plunging a knife into a bed but who later innocently became his wife and then left him when he realised her identity. “Isaac himself has the one perpetual thought about her, that she is alive and looking for him... Two in the morning, he says, is the time she will find him, one of these days... ‘She’s looking for me,’ he always says when anybody speaks to him about the one anxiety of his life.”<sup>22</sup>

That story was originally published in Dickens’s *Household Words* in 1855. Two years earlier Dickens had turned down another story by Collins about madness ‘The Monktons of Wincott Abbey’. Dickens asked his subeditor W. H. Wills to talk to Collins to explain why.

I doubt the subject of hereditary insanity—not with an eye to the feelings of the public in general, but with a consideration for those numerous families in which there is such a taint... On the whole I am disposed to think that it will be best to accept his offer of a new story instead.<sup>23</sup>

Hack also sees ‘Volpurno’ as pre-telling some of Collins’s work. *The Haunted Hotel* (1878) – a tale of murder and supernatural intrigue – is set in Venice though by then Collins had visited the city again at least twice, most recently in the autumn of 1877 with his long-term companion Caroline Graves. But Hack sees this much stronger connection between ‘Volpurno’ and Collins’s most famous and defining work *The Woman in White*. He compares them thus:

Driven by ‘the heat of an Italian evening’ to take a walk outside Venice the narrator [of ‘Volpurno’] comes upon a mysterious solitary woman in ‘an unfrequented place’; similarly intent on avoiding ‘the heat and gloom of London’ Walter Hartright will go ‘strolling along the lonely high-road’ outside London where he is accosted by ‘a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments’.

Finally – and intriguingly – Hack sees an echo of ‘Volpurno’ in *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, published four years later in 1847.

Both works describe an individual in permanent mourning for the love of his or her life, and in both cases that love...is never consummated. The narrator of both works is an outsider who learns the details of the story from a local informant...Both conclude with the narrator returning...to find the mourner...buried alongside his or her beloved.

Of course, similarity does not mean cause and effect. Hack does not offer any evidence that the unidentified London periodical where ‘Volpurno’ first appeared reached Howarth. Still less that Emily Brontë transferred essential elements of the plot into an English setting for her only novel

which she began writing in December 1845. Until some evidence emerges it is an intriguing idea, but no more.

### **The text**

While the original London publication remains undiscovered, we must take our text from the American sources and assume – or hope – that they are accurately copied from it. It is possible of course that the later versions are taken from the first US piracy in *The Albion* repeating any mistakes and omissions that may be there. Collation of the three July texts shows very few differences. The text here is taken from *The Albion* as it is the closest in time to the London original. Differences of wording in the *Pennsylvania Inquirer* (PI) and the *New Mirror* (NM) are noted as they occur but variations in punctuation are not. Clear errors of spelling which are corrected in the other July texts are silently corrected here. One word at the end of the final paragraph - ‘mould’ – seems wrong, although identical in all known versions.

It is possible that some text from the original has been omitted in the copies. It is odd for example that Volpurno is never introduced, his name is simply used more than half way through the piece as if the reader already knew it.

### **The titles**

The *Pennsylvania Inquirer and National Gazette* titles the piece almost identically to *The Albion*. It omits the word ‘or’ before ‘The Student’ and prints the epigraph. The story is the second item in a section headed ‘Varieties: From Files of Foreign Journals Received at the Office of the Inquirer.’

The *New Mirror* omits the title and the epigraph and simply begins the story with the words “Perfectly overcome...” However the text is headed ‘Selections from Foreign Journals, received at this office. We commence our selections for the present number of the New Mirror with the following beautiful and touching story:’

*The Rover, a Weekly Magazine of Tales, Poetry, and Engravings*<sup>5</sup> published a few months later uses the entirely different title, ‘A Maniac Bridegroom’, and also omits the epigraph and begins with the words “Perfectly overcome...”

Paul Lewis



# PENNSYLVANIA INQUIRER AND NATIONAL GAZETTE.

PHILADELPHIA, THURSDAY MORNING, JULY 20, 1843.

**Mountain House, THE FOX GROUND.**  
The proprietors of Mountain House, in the county of Luzerne, Pa., have the honor to announce that they have just received a large quantity of the finest and most delicious of the season, and are prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates. The proprietors are also prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates. The proprietors are also prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates.

**REAL ESTATE.**  
The proprietors of Mountain House, in the county of Luzerne, Pa., have the honor to announce that they have just received a large quantity of the finest and most delicious of the season, and are prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates. The proprietors are also prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates. The proprietors are also prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates.

**Hardware's and Cold Baths.**  
The proprietors of Mountain House, in the county of Luzerne, Pa., have the honor to announce that they have just received a large quantity of the finest and most delicious of the season, and are prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates. The proprietors are also prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates. The proprietors are also prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates.

**FAIRMOUNT ICE.**  
The proprietors of Mountain House, in the county of Luzerne, Pa., have the honor to announce that they have just received a large quantity of the finest and most delicious of the season, and are prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates. The proprietors are also prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates. The proprietors are also prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates.

**The Greatest Bargains ever offered.**  
The proprietors of Mountain House, in the county of Luzerne, Pa., have the honor to announce that they have just received a large quantity of the finest and most delicious of the season, and are prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates. The proprietors are also prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates. The proprietors are also prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates.

**The Inquirer AND NATIONAL GAZETTE.**  
The proprietors of Mountain House, in the county of Luzerne, Pa., have the honor to announce that they have just received a large quantity of the finest and most delicious of the season, and are prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates. The proprietors are also prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates. The proprietors are also prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates.

**VARIETIES.**  
The proprietors of Mountain House, in the county of Luzerne, Pa., have the honor to announce that they have just received a large quantity of the finest and most delicious of the season, and are prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates. The proprietors are also prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates. The proprietors are also prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates.

**THE WATER.**  
The proprietors of Mountain House, in the county of Luzerne, Pa., have the honor to announce that they have just received a large quantity of the finest and most delicious of the season, and are prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates. The proprietors are also prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates. The proprietors are also prepared to furnish the same to the public at the most reasonable rates.

*Pennsylvania Inquirer and National Gazette, 20 July 1843; XXIX 16*

266

## THE NEW MIRROR.

### SELECTIONS FROM FOREIGN JOURNALS,

RECEIVED AT THIS OFFICE.

We commence our selections for the present number of the New Mirror with the following beautiful and touching story:

Perfectly overcome by the heat of an Italian evening at Venice, I quitted the bustling gaiety of St. Mark's Place for the quiet of a gondola, and directing the man to shape his course for the island of Lido, (a narrow strip of land dividing the "lagunes," or shallows beyond the city, from the open sea,) I seated myself on the prow of the vessel, with a firm determination to make the most of the flimsy waft of air that every now and then ruffled the surface of the still, dark waters.

*The New Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction, 29 July 1843, p. 266*

his conscience seemed to tell him he was no companion for delicate woman, he tried to persuade himself that his constitution had at last mastered his imagination, and that he was a fit for society as his less excitable fellow-men. And he thought there was much excuse for him, for who could withstand the quiet, yet intense affection of the Englishwoman? Who could resist the temptation of listening to her sweet musical voice, or watching her sad, soft blue eyes, or of hearing her fascinating conversation? She was so devoted, so gentle, so enthusiastic on his favourite subject, so patient of his peevishness and melancholy, so considerate of his enjoyments, so comforting in his afflictions, he must surely have been without heart or feeling to have been coldly calculating on possibilities at such a time. He schooled himself to think that it was his solitary life that had so affected his faculties, and that a companion—and such a companion as his betrothed—would drive out all remains of his disorder, even supposing it to be still existing

### A MANIAC BRIDEGROOM.

to be kept down by the extreme fury of the blast, now got up so suddenly, and in so frightfully agitated a manner, that nothing could be done towards repairing damages; and for the remainder of that night we continued in about as uncomfortable a plight as can be imagined.

The whole odium of the affair, of course, fell upon poor C—, who from that time forth was looked upon as a perfect Jonah, by the ship's crew in general, and the old quartermaster in particular.

#### SONNET.

BY LAWRENCE LABREK.

Blest spirit of the Christian's heaven! Sweet saint!  
How fondly does my memory cling to thee!  
Since to this bosom thou hast ceased to be  
A matchless joy, I pour my weary plaint,  
Silent, but with an ever-gushing thought,  
Into the heedless air; and in my dreams  
I see thee as when first my heart I taught  
To yield thee homage; and as morning's beams  
To earth, thou to my soul wert joy and light;  
And, like a new-born spirit, I did feel  
That bliss so exquisite would ne'er take flight,  
Making a wound that Hope can never heal;  
And ever, while I live, this heart must mourn  
That pallid hour when thou wert from me torn.

### A MANIAC BRIDEGROOM.

A THRILLINGLY TOLD LOVE STORY OF VENICE.

Perfectly overcome by the heat of an Italian evening at Venice, I quitted the bustling gaiety of St. Mark's Place for the quiet of a gondola, and directing

My curiosity an old woman haze of the ev any degree of by advancing features. At h to glitter with was weeping braided over a tiful, and the demeanor, and her countenar common perso some time, occ that now gem pluck a few d grew in an o thought seem to the shore, I was in waiting

On my retu stance to my t lligent fellow a the mystery of her history is may, perhaps, It appeared, one," that th who had once Venice. She and whether it his conversati ments, that w

- 
- <sup>1</sup> *Illuminated Magazine* I August 1843 pp.209-211. It is first noted in Robert P. Ashley's PhD thesis *The Career of Wilkie Collins* Harvard University 15 November 1948 p.2
- <sup>2</sup> *The Albion, or British, Colonial and Foreign Weekly Gazette* (New York) 8 July 1843
- <sup>3</sup> *Pennsylvania Inquirer and National Gazette* (Philadelphia) 20 July 1843 XXIX No.16
- <sup>4</sup> *The New Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction* (New York) 29 July 1843 p.266
- <sup>5</sup> 'A Maniac Bridegroom'. *The Rover, a Weekly Magazine of Tales, Poetry, and Engravings* (New York), Vol.II No.9 pp.143-144, 25 December 1843
- <sup>6</sup> *Times Literary Supplement* (London) 2 January 2009 No.5518 pp.14-15
- <sup>7</sup> see [www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=63883](http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=63883).
- <sup>8</sup> William Collins to Harriet Collins, 16 April 1844; Pierpont Morgan MA3154 72.
- <sup>9</sup> William Collins to Harriet Collins, 19 April 1844; Pierpont Morgan MA3154 73.
- <sup>10</sup> Wilkie Collins *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, R.A.* London 1848 II p.247
- <sup>11</sup> *The Train* June 1857 pp.352-357.
- <sup>12</sup> To Ernouf, 21 March 1862, Baker and Clarke *The Letters of Wilkie Collins* I pp.205-208. Although the recipient is not mentioned in the letter it is clearly to Alfred-Auguste (Baron) Ernouf (1817-1889) who wrote 'Les nouveaux romanciers de l'Angleterre: Wilkie Collins,' in *Revue contemporaine*, Vol. 28 (21 August 1862), pp.724-750. WC wrote to him again on 5 May 1862 and 16 September 1862 about the piece.
- <sup>13</sup> Towle visited Collins in the summer of 1868 – see WC to Towle 26 June 1868 – and Collins sent his Memoir in May 1870 (Baker, Gasson, Law, and Lewis *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins* London 2005 II, p.116 and pp.185-186.) It is possible they met also in 1870 – see to Towle 30 October 1873 (*op. cit.* II, p.422)
- <sup>14</sup> George Makepeace Towle (1841-1893), *Appleton's Journal of Popular Literature, Science, and Art* 3 September 1870 pp.278-281.
- <sup>15</sup> To George Bainton, 23 September 1887, Baker and Clarke *The Letters of Wilkie Collins* II pp.543-544 and Bainton *The Art of Authorship* New York 1890 pp.89-91.
- <sup>16</sup> 'Mr. William Collins, R.A.' *Art-Union Journal* April 1847 p.137.
- <sup>17</sup> *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, R.A.* 1847 II pp.141-151
- <sup>18</sup> To Ernouf, 21 March 1862 *op cit.*
- <sup>19</sup> To an unknown correspondent 18 November 1869 *Collected Letters of Wilkie Collins: Addenda and Corrigenda* (3) in *Wilkie Collins Society Journal* NS vol.10 p.42.
- <sup>20</sup> To William Collins, 24 August 1842, Baker & Clarke (*Op. cit.*) I 13-14)
- <sup>21</sup> Nathaniel Beard 'Some Recollections of Yesterday' *Temple Bar* CII July 1894 pp.320-326.
- <sup>22</sup> 'The Ostler' in 'Holly Tree Inn', *Household Words* 15 December 1855 p.18.
- <sup>23</sup> Charles Dickens to W H Wills 8 February 1853 (*Pilgrim* VII p.23)

## VOLPURNO—OR THE STUDENT.

BY W. WILKIE COLLINS.

“—Memory, like a drop that, night and day,  
Falls cold and ceaseless, wore *her* heart away.” —Lalla Rookh<sup>1</sup>

Perfectly overcome by the heat of an Italian evening at Venice, I quitted the bustling gaiety of St Mark's Place for the quiet of a gondola, and directing the man to shape his course for the island of Lido, (a narrow strip of land dividing the "lagunes," or shallows beyond the city, from the open sea,) I seated myself on the prow of the vessel, with a firm determination to make the most of the flimsy wafts of air<sup>2</sup> that every now and then ruffled the surface of the still, dark waters.<sup>3</sup>

Nothing intercepted my view of the distant city, whose mighty buildings glowed beneath the long, red rays of the setting sun, save occasionally, when a market boat on its return floated lazily past us, or the hull of some tall merchantman shut out for an instant the dome of a magnificent church or the deep red brickwork of the Ducal Palace. Inexpressibly beautiful was the glimmering of the far off lights in the houses, as, one after another, they seemed to start out of the bosom of the deep; and at that quiet hour the repose—the peculiar repose of Venice—seemed mellowed into perfect harmony with the delicious languor of the atmosphere. The sounds of laughter, or snatches of rude songs that now and then came over the waves, instead of interrupting [*sic*], invested with fresh charms the luxurious silence of the moment. We touched the narrow strip of sand that forms the beach of the little island, and stepping ashore, I enjoyed the only particle of green sward in all Venice.

I walked backward and forward<sup>4</sup> for some time, thinking of England and English friends, (for at such hours the mind wanders to distant scenes and old customs,) without interruption, until a slight rustling among the bushes of the island reminded me that I was not the only tenant of the garden of the Lido<sup>5</sup>, and looking through the fast gathering darkness, I discovered an aged female pacing the smooth walk near, apparently lost in contemplation.

My curiosity was rather excited by the presence of a lone old woman in such an unfrequented place; but the haze of the evening prevented my observing her with any degree of accuracy, and as I

feared to disturb her by advancing too near, I could only guess at her features. At last the dwarf trees in the island “began to glitter with the climbing moon,”<sup>6</sup> and I saw that she was weeping bitterly. Her thick gray tresses were braided over a face that had evidently once been beautiful, and there was a dignity and propriety in her demeanour, and a native nobleness of expression in her countenance, which told me that I looked on no common person. She continued her solitary walk for some time, occasionally pausing to look up to the stars that now gemmed the clear glowing firmament, or to pluck a few dead leaves from a little rose bush that grew in an obscure corner of the garden, until a thought seemed suddenly to strike her, and hastening to the shore<sup>7</sup> she stepped into a small gondola that was in waiting<sup>8</sup> and rapidly disappeared.

On my return to Venice, I mentioned the circumstance to my cicerone, or guide, a remarkably intelligent fellow; and much to my astonishment, he solved the mystery of the lonely lady to me immediately. As her history is one of great devotion and misfortune, it may perhaps merit repetition.

It appeared, then, from the statement of the cicerone, that the elderly lady was an English woman who had once been the beauty of the gay circles of Venice. She had there met with a student in astronomy; and whether it was his lonely mystic life, the charm of his conversation and person, or his scientific attainments, that won her, I know not, but he gained her affections, and it is still remembered by those acquainted with her at the time, that her attachment to him so<sup>9</sup> intensely passive in its devotion as to seem almost unearthly, and that very Lido, now the scene of her affliction, was once the favourite spot for their early love greetings.

He was a strange, wild creature, that student—his family were natives of a distant land, and he had travelled to Italy to devote himself, body and mind, to his favourite pursuit. From the after testimony of one of his friends, it appeared that in childhood<sup>10</sup> he had been attacked with fits of temporary derangement, and his extraordinary application to the mysterious, exciting study of astronomy had increased this infirmity<sup>11</sup> in a most extraordinary and terrible manner. At times he was haunted by a vision of a woman of disgusting ugliness who seemed to pursue and torment him wherever he went. In a few hours, delirium, and sometimes raging madness, would ensue from this hallucination, and though

he regularly recovered free from the terrible creation of his mind, it was with a constitution more and more decayed by each successive ravage of his disorder. As he advanced, however, to manhood, these violent and destructive fits<sup>12</sup> became less and less frequent and at the time that he met with the beautiful English lady, though his conscience seemed to tell him that he was no companion for a delicate woman, he tried to persuade himself that his constitution had at last mastered his imagination and that he was as fit for society as his less excitable fellow men. And he thought there was much excuse for him, for who could withstand the quiet yet intense affection of the English woman? Who could resist the temptation of listening to her sweet musical voice, of watching her sad soft blue eyes, or of hearing her fascinating conversation? She was so devoted, so gentle, so enthusiastic on his favourite subject, so patient of his little fits of peevishness, and melancholy, so considerate of his enjoyments, so comforting in his afflictions, he must surely have been without heart or feeling to have been coldly calculating on possibilities at such a time. He schooled himself to think that it was his solitary life that had so affected his faculties, and that a companion—and such a companion as his betrothed—would drive out all remains of his disorder, even supposing it to be still existing. In short, the eloquent pleading of the heart prevailed over the still small whisper of conscience; the wedding day was fixed, and it was remarked with surprise that the nearer it approached, the more melancholy did Volpurno become. However, the ceremony was performed with great splendour, and the bridal party set out to spend the day on the mainland, where the friends of the bride were to say farewell before she proceeded with her husband on the wedding tour. They were chatting merrily in the little hotel at Mestri, on the mainland, when they were horrified by suddenly hearing sounds of frantic laughter, followed by wild shrieks of agony, and the student rushed into the room, his frame convulsed with horror, with a drawn sword in his hand, as if pursuing something a few yards before him, with an expression of mingled fury and despair. Before the horrified guests could interfere, he had jumped from the window, and with the same shrieks of laughter, sped across the country in pursuit of his phantom enemy.

Assistance was at hand; he was instantly followed; but with supernatural strength he held on his course<sup>13</sup> for hours. He was occasionally seen, as he paused for an instant to strike furiously in the air, and his cries of anguish were sometimes borne by the wind to the ears of his pursuers; but they never gained on him, and unless he neared a village, and was stopped by the inhabitants, his capture seemed impracticable. At last, as night grew on, he sunk exhausted at a lone hovel by the way side, and the bride and her party came up with the maniac bridegroom. But the stern fit was past and gone, and he was lifted insensible upon a coarse pallet in the hut. The Englishwoman sat by his side and bathed his temples, and watched his deep, long slumber, from the rise of the moon to the bright advent of day. And thus passed the bridal night of the heiress and the beauty.

Towards the going down of the sun, Volpurno became conscious, and though the fit had<sup>14</sup> left him, the agony of his situation allowed no repose to his jarred, disordered nerves. His remorse was terrible to behold: over and over again did he heap curses on his selfishness in drawing an innocent. Trusting woman into such a labyrinth of suffering. All her repeated assurances of her forgiveness, of her happiness at his recovery, of her hopes for the future, failed to quiet him; and so, between soothing his anguish and administering his remedies, three days passed, and on the third a material change took place. The dim eye of the student brightened, and his wan cheek flushed with the hue of health. He commanded all to leave the room but his bride, and to her he made full confession of his terrible infirmity, and of its seizing him with tenfold violence at the inn at Mestri, and of the frightful forebodings he had felt as their wedding approached. And then he grew calmer, and the smile again came forth upon his lip, and the melody returned to his voice, and at his favourite hour of midnight,—in a peaceful quietude that had been unknown to him in his life, — Volpurno died.

The corpse was carried to Venice and interred by the Englishwoman by her former trysting-place on the Lido. People wondered at her calmness under such an affliction, for she lived on, but little changed—save that she was paler and thinner—from the quiet creature that had won the fatal affection of Volpurno.

By degrees her more immediate friends died, or were called into other countries, and she was left alone in Venice: and then her solitary pilgrimages to the Lido became more and more frequent. As years grew on, and the finger of time imprinted the first furrows on the fair, delicate cheek, and planted the grey among the rich beauties of her hair, these visits increased. While, from day to day, the powers of her body became older, the faculties of her heart grew greener and younger. Years dulled not the pristine delicacy of her feelings, and age seemed in her to nourish instead of impairing the silent growth of memory.

\* \* \* \* \*

A few months afterwards I again visited the Lido at the same hour, but the Englishwoman did not appear. I walked towards the rose bush which I conjectured grew over the grave of Volpurno; its withered leaves were untrimmed, and the earth around it was newly heaped up. I asked no more questions; the freshness of the mould<sup>15</sup>, and the neglect of the rose tree, were eloquent informers.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sir Thomas Moore (1779-1852) *Lalla Rookh – an Oriental Romance* (1817). The quote has been altered as indicated by WC's italics. The original verse reads

And memory, like a drop that, night and day,  
Falls cold and ceaseless, wore my heart away.

*The Poetical Works of Thomas Moore* Galignani, Paris 1842 was in WC's library at his death (Baker *Wilkie Collins's Library*, 2002 p.134, no.358). The quoted verse is p339a lines15-16

<sup>2</sup> PI has 'flimsey air'

<sup>3</sup> At this time Wilkie's only experience of Venice had been five years earlier in 1838 when he stayed there with his family. They left Florence on 14 May travelling via Bologna, Parma, Verona, and Padua arriving in Mestri towards the end of the month. They took a gondola to Venice from Mestri and departed from Venice on 26 June for Innsbruck. (*Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, R.A.* 1847 II pp.141-151)

<sup>4</sup> NM has the more English 'backwards and forwards'

<sup>5</sup> PI has 'the garden of the Lido'

<sup>6</sup> Lord Byron *Manfred* Act II scene 3. The *Complete Works with Life* 1842 was in WC's library at his death. (Baker 2002 p.84, No.65)

<sup>7</sup> NM omits 'the'

<sup>8</sup> NM and PI omit 'in'

<sup>9</sup> NM and PI 'to him was so intensely'

<sup>10</sup> PI 'in his childhood'

<sup>11</sup> PI 'his infirmity'

<sup>12</sup> NM 'destructive attacks'

<sup>13</sup> NM 'on his wild course'

<sup>14</sup> NM 'the delirium had'

<sup>15</sup> All three have 'mould' but it seems likely that the word intended is 'mound'

